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Evaluation

Report on the assessment of the MDG reports

Executive summary

Summary

The present executive summary of the report on the assessment of the MDG reports introduces the key findings in preparation for a presentation of the full report and discussion at the first regular session 2004. A management response will be available at that time.

The Executive Board may wish to take note of the present executive summary.

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I. Context

1. The present report presents a synopsis of the findings of the rapid assessment of the Millennium Development Goals reports (MDGRs) that was conducted by the Evaluation Office of the United Nations Development Programme between February and May 2003. The assessment was undertaken at the request of UNDP central units and the regional bureaux to examine the reporting processes in place and assess the quality, relevance and value added of MDG reports, with a view to assisting UNDP and the United Nations country teams (UNCTs) to improve reporting on the progress made towards the attainment of the MDGs. It focuses on the following aspects of the MDGRs:

(a) value added;
(b) content and quality;
(c) ownership;
(d) capacity;
(e) advocacy and dissemination; and
(f) alignment and linkages with other country level reporting processes.

2. The findings and recommendations of this assessment are intended to inform UNDP senior management, country offices and UNCTs on how to improve the 'product' and to strengthen the reporting

3. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are central to the mission and priorities of UNDP and, indeed, those of the entire United Nations system. MDG reports are emerging as one of the most important instruments for tracking and monitoring progress at the national level and for putting into place effective public campaign strategies for attainment of the MDGs. The significance of this assessment stems from the Secretary-General's designation of the UNDP Administrator, in his capacity as chair of the United Nations Development Group (UNDG), to be the scorekeeper and campaign manager for the MDGs. The initiative for reporting on the MDGs started in 2001, with Cambodia, Chad, Tanzania and Viet Nam producing the first MDGRs. By April 2003, 23 countries had produced MDG Reports. Of these, seven were produced in 2001, 16 in 2002 and by April 2003, another three had been released. Cameroon and Viet Nam have already produced two MDGRs, in 2001 and 2002 respectively. At present, another 50 countries are in the process of preparing MDGRs due for release by the end of 2003.

4. The evaluation team adopted a variety of approaches in carrying out the assessment, ranging from desk reviews of key documents and interviews with stakeholders to country visits and observation of the MDGR processes. The evaluation team reviewed documents relating to the MDGs, and held meetings with key UNDP and UNDG officials in New York and a wide range of stakeholders at the country level. The team leader and another team member, respectively, attended a regional workshop on MDGs organized by the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific in Dhaka between February 22-24, 2003 and a similar workshop on in Senegal being held concurrently.

5. Altogether, the evaluation team undertook a comprehensive review of 24 MDGRs that had been published as of April 2003, and administered a questionnaire to 24 country offices to obtain details on the process. Eight countries

were selected by the Evaluation Office in consultation with UNDP's Regional Bureaux: Lesotho and Senegal in Africa, Cambodia and Mongolia in Asia and the Pacific, Albania and Poland in Eastern Europe and CIS, and Bolivia in Latin America and the Caribbean and Yemen in the Arab region for in-depth case studies. (The team was unable visit Yemen due to security restrictions, and the Yemen country report was prepared by the national consultant on the team.) National consultants were commissioned in each country to prepare comprehensive background reports on the MDGRs and these reports formed the basis for the team's detailed discussion with several stakeholders including the UNCTs, representatives from government and civil society, members of parliament, the media, and others.

6. A caveat is in order. This forward-looking assessment is not intended to shed light on the progress made towards realizing the MDGs. It is too early for such an assessment. The focus is on the preparation of the MDGRs – identifying features of the process and the product that are important. The evaluation highlights key issues and concerns for improving reporting at the country level and discusses some implications for UNDP and for the United Nations system.

II. Main findings

7. The findings emanating from the assessment that are listed below may have significant implications for UNDP and the United Nations system. Overall, there are wide variations in country ownership, authorship and value added of MDGRs as advocacy tools and, contrary to expectations, these reports have not as yet filtered into parliamentary or broader national debates on the MDGs and their targets. There is a need for convergence and stronger links between the monitoring and reporting processes of MDGs, poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) and other comprehensive national development frameworks and reporting instruments such as national human development reports (NHDRs), the common country assessment (CCA), and United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs). The findings suggest that UNDP country offices in particular will need to focus on how to coordinate and harmonize UN-wide efforts in support of the MDGs and the PRSPs and their alignment with national development frameworks.

Value added of MDGRs

8. There seems to be a lack of clarity on the real value added of the MDGRs. Lost as a result of the preoccupation with technocratic discussions on the length, format and content of the MDGRs and the setting up of steering committees, working groups and task forces is strategic thinking on: (a) the results that the MDGRs are expected to generate, (b) how to use the MDGRs more effectively for transforming the lives of people, and (c) how the United Nations in general, and UNDP in particular, can deliver on the MDGs.

Content and quality

9. While it is encouraging to see countries adapting the MDGs to their country-specific context, a much more open and transparent process of negotiation

and public discussion is needed to arrive at a well thought out set of country-specific goals, targets and indicators that could be nationally monitored. Furthermore, despite the specification of goals, targets and indicators, there are major data gaps in reporting. Regular data are not presented on many of the suggested targets and indicators. Particularly glaring gaps in statistical reporting are seen in the absence of disaggregated data on most indicators. It is vital to track how the poorest and most disadvantaged in society are faring. Unfortunately, data on gender differentials, and also on the quality of life of minority communities, ethic and racial groups, disabled or even the poorest quintile of the population, are seldom available in most countries. The lack of appropriate data has prevented many countries from reporting effectively on issues of environmental sustainability and women's empowerment. Significantly, few countries report on Goal 8 ("Develop a global partnership for development").

Ownership

10. The assessment reveals wide variations in the ownership and authorship of MDG reports, although successful efforts have been made by UNCTs to engage government in the preparatory process. While it is important to encourage diversity to promote country ownership and reflect country-level realities, more strategic thinking is needed on what forms of reporting will generate maximum public support and action around the MDGs. Evidence from this assessment suggests that in many cases it has been convenient to mistakenly equate government authorship with national ownership.

Capacity

11. Effective participation in the MDGR preparatory process is often constrained by the capacity within a country. The evaluation examined two aspects of capacity. The first concerns a country's statistical capacity for data collection, analysis, monitoring and reporting on the MDGs. The second, closely related to the first, concerns the capacity of organizations (government, the United Nations and civil society organizations) within the country to support the preparation of MDGRs and, more broadly, attainment of the MDGs.

12. *Statistical capacity* varies within a country from one goal to another. In most countries and regions, especially in Africa, weak statistical capacities are likely to pose the biggest challenge for proper reporting on the MDGs. Two of the weakest areas in terms of specific capacities, as reported by countries, are: (a) the capacity to incorporate statistical analysis into policy; and (b) monitoring and evaluation capacity. Particularly striking is the extremely limited capacity in countries to address three specific MDGs: Goal 5 (Improve maternal health); Goal 6 (Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases); and Goal 7 (Ensure environmental sustainability). Statistical capacity strengthening at the country level will mean addressing several issues as a matter of priority, including: (i) strengthening the database to make it more comprehensive and relevant to the MDGs; (ii) enhancing capacity within countries for monitoring and evaluation and incorporating data for decision making; (iii) developing short-term measures that can help assess progress towards the attainment of the MDGs; and (iv) strengthening links between MDGR and PRSP monitoring in PRSP countries.

13. *Organizational capacity* of the principal stakeholders associated with the preparation of the MDGRs is equally important. Such capacities vary from one country to another.

(a) *Government capacity* is frequently constrained by four types of deficiencies: shortage of staff, limited professional competence, frequent transfers, and limited ability to produce easy-to-read reports that comment on human development trends in society.

(b) *Civil society organization (CSO) capacity* is important for ensuring effective ownership and participation in the MDGR preparation process. In some countries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are few; and they frequently lack adequate capacity to engage in policy dialogue. In other instances, governments do not encourage NGO participation and involvement. They tend to view NGOs as adversaries. In such cases, UNDP and the United Nations system have a crucial role to play in nurturing NGOs and in promoting the active engagement of CSOs.

(c) *United Nations capacity* in general and *UNDP capacity* in particular are important for ensuring effective reporting on the MDGs. Once again, the findings of this assessment show that the capacity of the United Nations system varies from one country to another. With few exceptions, in-house UNDP capacities for policy advice, monitoring, reporting, advocacy, communication and coordination are limited. Here again, the heads of most United Nations organizations point out that they too are short-staffed. As a result, the members of most United Nations organizations on the MDGR preparation team do not seem able to find sufficient time to engage fully and comprehensively in the preparation of MDGRs.

14. The authors of the present evaluation believe that a systematic and strategic assessment by UNDP has the potential of greatly improving the effectiveness of capacity-building efforts at the country level. It is also important to address the following four areas: (a) better coordination at different levels – national and international, and especially between United Nations organizations at the country level; (b) capacity for policy analysis and formulation; (c) capacity for resource mobilization; and (d) capacity for assessing development effectiveness.

Advocacy and dissemination

15. Advocacy and dissemination are essential elements for delivering on the MDGs. The UNDP country offices have introduced many creative activities, often without a well thought out long-term strategy for advocacy. The assessment reveals divergent actions at the country level, and differing opinions with respect to responsibilities. There is a sense that in the process of advocating for the MDGs, the United Nations system may be generating too many expectations without necessarily having the capacity to deliver. Whereas effective advocacy on the MDGs is necessary, advocacy alone will not be sufficient to generate good policies or ensure good results.

Reporting on human development at the country level

16. There is need to link up more strategically to ongoing processes of reporting on human development at the country level. There is clearly a need to strengthen the links between MDGRs and NDHRs. Given their complementary roles, NHDRs and MDGRs must be seen as mutually supporting documents, not as

adversaries, if they are to bring added value to the process of national development dialogue and agenda setting. MDGRs are intended for awareness advocacy; while NHDRs are intended for policy advocacy. NHDRs must become the main source for data on which the MDGRs will draw. At the same time, NHDRs need to be strengthened for their effectiveness in offering policy analysis and advice to countries. Similarly, it is necessary to take a second look to rationalize and simplify other United Nations reporting requirements such as the CCA and the UNDAF in the light of the MDGRs.

Organizational issues

17. The assessment includes the following organizational findings relating to UNDP, the role of the resident coordinator and the ties between governments, international financial institutions (IFIs) and the United Nations, especially in PRSP countries.

(a) *The role of the UNDP.* Reporting on MDGs has several implications for the role of UNDP at the country level in terms of fulfilling expectations, redefining the nature of programme support, redefining partnerships (with other United Nations organizations, bilateral organizations and IFIs, as well as with government and civil society organizations), strengthening in-house competencies, and envisaging what is critically needed to bring about the more active engagement of civil society. Discussions will be necessary to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders.

(b) *The role of the resident coordinator.* The role of the resident coordinator system in reporting on and campaigning for the MDGs needs to be clarified. High expectations are being generated without a clear understanding of how the resident coordinator system will be strengthened (both in terms of manpower and financial resources) to sustain MDG reporting and campaigning efforts.

(c) *Ties between government, IFIs and the United Nations in PRSP countries.* In PRSP countries, closer ties between government, IFIs and the United Nations system will help strengthen monitoring of progress towards the attainment of the MDGs. The assessment highlights the need for greater clarity, convergence and coordination between monitoring and reporting processes for the MDGRs and the PRSPs. UNDP country offices in particular will need to focus on how to coordinate and harmonize United Nations-wide efforts in support of the MDGRs and PRSPs.

III. Reporting challenges

18. The assessment has identified a set of *seven challenges* that must be met as the UNDP and the United Nations move rapidly to strengthen reporting on MDGs.

The communication challenge

19. Much must be done at the country level to promote awareness of the MDGs. While MDGRs have a useful role to play in educating and sensitizing the public on the MDGs, there is definite 'reader fatigue' setting in. It is therefore critical to bear in mind the distinct purpose of the MDGRs and keep the reports

simple, brief, and visually appealing. It is particularly important to keep the language free of jargon. The findings of this assessment suggest that presenting data or announcing goals may not be sufficient; people need to relate the goals to their lives. Some description must accompany any data in order to humanize the reports. MDGRs must portray the true picture of human poverty and reflect, in particular, the changes occurring in the lives of the poorest and most neglected communities in society. Equally important, communication about MDGs must re-assure NGOs and others that the focus on MDGs is not intended to displace attention from other issues such as violence, discrimination, human rights violations and the like. The evidence from the assessment leads to the conclusion that it maybe useful to make the MDGRs strategically 'controversial' so that the dialogue that follows sparks off debates in parliaments, in the media and among citizens.

The participation challenge

20. UNDP and the United Nations system need to be conscious of the dangers of equating government authorship to national ownership. Processes need to be put in place for ensuring fair inclusion of NGOs and effective consultation with CSOs and all key national stakeholders and consciously widening the circle to include the private sector, Parliamentarians and others as advocates of MDGs. An open process of consultation with partners will need to be adopted to review, reform and recalibrate goals, targets and indicators. While the participation of NGOs and CSOs is invaluable, it must, however, not end with the production of the MDGR. The real essence of participation will lie in mobilizing support of NGOs and CSOs in the follow-up actions needed to attain the MDGs at country level.

The reporting challenge

21. MDG reporting must link up with the country-level political processes to position the MDGs as a central item on the public development agenda. MDGRs must be seen not as statistical reports, but as a popular, public affairs and political reports that will mobilize society's support. Regardless of who authors an MDGR, it must be honest, bold, and accurately depict the human development situation in the country. To have added value, the MDGR should spark debates on policy relevance and encourage public dialogue on the MDGs. The assessment indicates that mechanisms are needed to ensure regular and periodic reporting on the MDGs at the country level. Disaggregated data on trends and numerous indicators must be presented in an easy-to-comprehend manner. A decision also needs to be taken on reporting on the MDGs by developed countries.

The statistical challenge

22. Concerted efforts are needed to address the issue of gaps in data revealed by this assessment. There are additional issues of standardization of definitions and methodology, timing, quality, and the like, which must be addressed. Special attention must be paid to disaggregation of data by identifiers such as gender, location, and ethnicity so that differentials can be assessed and the progress of the poorest groups can be tracked more effectively. More needs to be done to improve public access to data on human development and the MDGs. Supplementary products (such as short reports) on different dimensions of the MDGs will be need to be planned.

The campaign challenge

23. Launching a professionally designed campaign with a long-term strategic mission is an urgent necessity. This has to be country-specific, keeping in mind (a) sensitivities within a country, (b) the generally low confidence of people in governments and political leadership, and (c) the dangers of not meeting the expectations that a campaign can generate. An important consideration is to identify who will design, direct and finance the campaign. A professional assessment will help address the issue of whether or not there ought be a lead agency for each goal. The potential of parliamentarians and the media to support the campaign needs to be tapped more systematically. Getting a buy-in for the MDGs may be simpler in the PRSP countries, where the process of promoting country ownership of the PRSP has been put in motion, and also in countries with a high dependence on official development assistance (ODA). However, different strategies will be needed to ensure buy-in on the part of developed countries and those less dependent on ODA than, for example, the PRSP countries or heavily indebted poor countries.

The evaluation challenge

24. Tracking progress through the use of data is not evaluation. It is important to move beyond reporting numbers to evaluating progress. Governments and citizens will soon want to know why policies are not working and what changes are needed. Though the MDGR is not the place to discuss policy alternatives, the success of reporting will depend upon the effectiveness of policy analysis and programmatic evaluations. The NHDRs will have an even more important role to play as MDGRs become popular in stimulating public debates and demanding action.

The global cooperation challenge

25. Monitoring the global consensus on partnership for development is critical with respect to the MDGs. Having well-defined goals, targets and indicators for ODA is a useful starting point. At the same time, campaigning in developed countries has to be intensified in order to mobilize support for the MDGs and deliver results in terms of aid, trade and access to markets and technology.

IV. Recommendations

26. The assessment has identified a number of specific recommendations that follow as UNDP and the United Nations system gear up to meet the seven challenges. These recommendations are addressed to (a) the United Nations system, (b) UNDP, and (c) global development partners.

The United Nations system

27. *On the product.* It is necessary to focus on the real value added of the MDGRs and strategically position them to generate maximum debate, discussion and public action around the MDGs. The MDGRs must emerge as public affairs documents with a wide readership. They also ought to be supplemented by a range of simple thematic publications that report on different aspects of the MDGs.

28. *On the process*. It is important to work out a strategy for establishing and nurturing partnerships with CSOs at both the global and country levels. Closer linkages with the IFIs need to be developed. The United Nations system should work towards developing a common United Nations database that pulls together the work of different United Nations organizations (such as Child Info, Dev Info and VMap) Launching country--specific campaigns that link up to global initiatives surrounding the MDGs will greatly strengthen the overall process of reporting on MDGs. Such a global campaign strategy must develop a differentiated strategy keeping in mind three principal constituencies: (i) the developed countries, (ii) the developing countries, and (iii) target audiences within each country. As part of the dissemination strategy, it will be helpful to develop a portfolio of campaign materials and products. It is also essential to rationalize reporting requirements especially those prescribed by the United Nations system such as the CCA, NHDRs and PRSPs.

29. The role of the resident coordinator: The Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator needs to be strengthened and supported to develop a long-term strategic plan on MDG reporting that takes into account key considerations at the country level: how policies are made; who are the key players; who are the best allies; what is the best use of data; what priority changes are needed; where are the levers for change; how can short-term progress be measured; what is the right timing for the MDGRs; what ought to be the frequency of MDGRs; what is the nature of supplementary materials that will be needed; and so on. An integral part of the strategic reporting plan should be an effective advocacy and dissemination plan.

UNDP

30. UNDP should undertake new initiatives to develop programmes for capacity building of CSOs. At the same time, efforts must be made to strengthen policy analysis functions in order to engage more meaningfully in discussions on programme and policy interventions that can deliver on the MDGs at the country level. It is important to strengthen the content of the NHDRs to make them more policy relevant. Efforts should also be made to discourage MDGRs from becoming policy documents or publications that resemble NHDRs. At the same time, to sharpen the focus and enhance the content, quality and utility of MDGRs, UNDP must dialogue more effectively with the IFIs on three issues: data, policy and the financing of MDGs. The organization will need to support efforts that assess development effectiveness (of programmes, organizations, advocacy and dissemination) for attaining the MDGs.

Global partnerships

31. UNDP and the United Nations system as a whole should mobilize global partners to mount a global initiative on statistics that will bring together international and national statistical organizations to engage in a comprehensive assessment of data needed for the effective monitoring of MDGs. The United Nations and its global partners should consider global surveys on the MDGs (similar to the Multi-Indicator Cluster following a standard set of global guidelines to compare performance across countries and regions of the world, and to track and report systematically on global progress towards the MDGs. Global development partners will need to collectively explore collaborative mechanisms

that will ensure regular reporting on MDGs by countries. It is of the utmost importance to track progress on Goal 8, which is not being reported upon by most countries. Significantly, the findings of this assessment suggest that this is regarded by most developing countries as the biggest challenge for delivering on the MDGs.